

“THE TREASURE CHEST OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY: 4) LESSONS IN LOVE”

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Call to Gather from *True Love* by Charles Mee (a contemporary adaptation of a play by Euripedes)

So love is who you are
And how you are
What kind of a person you are.¹

Sermon

The ancient Greeks famously had several different words for love. Collectively, these words captured more of the nuance of the concept “love” than the one-size-fits-all way we use the word today. One of the ancient Greeks’ words for love was *philia*, the love between friends and family and community members. This love connotes familiarity and loyalty. Then there was *eros*—passionate love. This is an embodied love: it has a strong sensual component and often involves intense longing and desire. It is a love that is palpable.² Plato further nuanced the word by seeing it as not just physical, but also an appreciation for the beauty of the soul of the beloved. *Eros* is typically the love of lovers. Yet another word the Greeks used was *agape*—a love that is more generalized than *philia* and is characterized as charitable and unconditional. This is the love that Jesus had for the woman about to be stoned for adultery even though he didn’t know her. It’s the kind of love Gandhi had for the British imperialists who imprisoned him and attacked his followers. It’s the kind of love Universalists like Olympia Brown preached and lived—a love for all humanity regardless of individual creed or actions.

Unitarian Universalist ministers love to preach about *agape*. I’m no exception. If you walk up to us and say: “Preach the Unitarian Universalist gospel, brother! Preach it, sister!”—we’ll more than likely quickly make our way to *agape* (maybe by way of the interdependent web, which goes hand in hand with *agape*). Though it’s less common, we’re not afraid to preach about *philia*. But for the most part we avoid *eros* in our preaching. It’s treacherous territory. For one thing, there’s our general Western discomfort with sensuality—a discomfort that many of us cannot shed even after we figure out just how destructive the dualistic thinking that underlies this discomfort has been. And we are certainly mindful that our congregants (not to mention ourselves) have

¹ Charles L. Mee, *Divine Fire: Eight Contemporary Plays Inspired by the Greeks*, Caridad Svich, ed. (New York: Backstage Books, 2005), pp. 218-219.

² Susan Griffin, *The Eros of Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 9.

more than likely had mixed experiences of *eros*. On any given week, there are people sitting before us in our services who are in a destructive relationship of *eros*—maybe one that's been destructive for years or even decades. There are others who aren't in or perhaps have never been in such a relationship, some by intention, others not. And we certainly want to avoid conveying any sense that experiencing love characterized by *eros* is required for a life that is happy and fulfilling. Discretion being the better part of valor for most of us UU ministers, we opt to leave *eros* alone.

You can see this in my preaching around Valentine's Day. I don't know if I've ever talked about *eros* on Valentine's Day. Sure, I'm usually in the middle of my annual sermon series right about now, but whose to say that the timing of that isn't unconsciously (or not) the result of an intense desire to avoid having to deal with Valentine's Day?

But alas, this year it felt like there was no way I could avoid *eros* in a sermon series devoted to the Greeks. A character in *True Love*, Charles Mee's adaptation of a play by Euripedes, says it well:

Fundamentally,
what the Greeks thought
was that love is not just a sentiment
but is actually the physical principle of the universe itself
the very stuff that unifies the universe,
you know, binds the universe together.³

So I decided that I must do something on love—particularly *eros*—in this sermon series, and that in the flow of the series it would make sense to do so in the fourth sermon of the series, and, oh my God—it's Valentine's Day weekend! I can duck Eros' golden arrow no longer!

Here are three stories about love from Greek mythology, with a brief interlude between the second and third stories by a modern-day incarnation of the ancient Greeks—of course, I'm speaking of Johnny Cash.

The first is the story of Eros and Psyche. This comes from Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of *Metamorphoses*. As you hear this story, picture in your mind the setting of Zimmerman's play: the action takes place in and around a large, shallow pool of water.

[A raft, covered in red fabric, and bound with gold rope, is placed in the water. Q and A enter and sit on diagonally opposite corners of the deck. The doors open and EROS enters. He is winged, naked, blindfolded, and carrying a golden arrow. Throughout the following he will come forward and lie down to sleep on the raft in the water.]

Q:
Who is this?

³ Mees, p. 216.

A:
This is Eros, god of love.

Q:
Why does he have wings?

A:
So he can move quickly from body to body.

Q:
Why is he naked?

A:
To make us transparent.

Q:
To make us what?

A:
Transparent in our love. Foolish to others. Exposed.

Q:
Why is he blind?

A:
He is always pictured blind, but he really isn't.

Q:
Because in love we are so ignorant and so compulsive?

A:
There's that.

Q:
What else?

A:
He is blind to show how he takes away our ordinary vision, our mistaken vision, that depends on the appearance of things.
[EROS lies down on the raft to sleep. Throughout the following, PSYCHE enters, carrying a candelabra. She makes her way down the stairs and along the deck, very slowly and quietly.]

Q:
Who's this coming down the stairs?

A:
Her name is Psyche.

Q:
Psyche? Her name is Psyche?

A:
Yes.

Q:
What's she doing here?

A:
She's married to the god, but she's never seen him.

Q:
Why is that?

A:
He forbids it.

Q:
How did they meet?

A:
Psyche was so beautiful, the goddess Aphrodite hated her. She sent her son to punish her, but he fell in love instead.

Q:
Does she know that he is a god?

A:
No. She suspects he is a monster.
[PSYCHE is startled by something. She looks over her shoulder, then continues along the deck.]

...

Q:
Why does she suspect he is a monster?

A:
Her jealous sisters told her so.
[PSYCHE is startled again. Then she continues.]

Q:

And she listened to them?

A:

Unfortunately, yes.

Q:

So now she's coming to see him as he sleeps?

A:

Yes.

Q:

To make certain.

A:

Yes.

Q:

With her eyes.

A:

Yes. She's very young. It happens all the time.

Q:

She doesn't trust what she has felt herself?

A:

Not with the radical trust we need.

[PSYCHE steps into the pool. She moves slowly, so as not to make noise. She approaches the sleeping EROS and holds the candelabra over him, looking. This happens in silence.]

Q:

What does the word "Psyche" mean?

A:

In Greek it means "the soul."

[Wax from the candles falls on EROS. He wakes suddenly and turns abruptly toward PSYCHE. They stare at each other a long moment. Then, in one motion, she extinguishes the candelabra in the water. She and EROS begin to separate...]

Q:

What's going to happen to her now?

A:

She's going to suffer.

Q:
And?

A:
She's going to suffer.

Q:
And?

A:
She's going to suffer.

Q:
What does she have to do?

A:
She is given horrible and lonely tasks by Aphrodite.

Q:
Such as?

A:
Sorting thousands of little seeds one from the other.

Q:
How did she manage?

A:
Some little insects help her.

Q:
Like in fairy tales?

A:
Like in all the fairy tales.

Q:
What else?
[PSYCHE sinks into the water.]

A:
She had to go down to the Underworld, fetch various things.

Q:
Wasn't she afraid?

A:
She was petrified, but she did it all the same.

Q:
Wasn't it hopeless?

A:
It was hopeless, but she did it all the same.

Q:
What did Love do in the meantime?

A:
He healed his little wound. It hurt him so much when she looked at him like that. The wax from the candle fell on him and burnt him.

Q:
How does it end?

A:
She finishes her tasks and Zeus declares enough's enough.

Q:
He overrides Love's mother?
[EROS and PSYCHE look at each other. They begin to move toward each other.]

A:
Yes. And further, he gives Psyche a special potion and she becomes immortal. Then he declares that their marriage will last forever.

Q:
Does it?

A:
Of course.

Q:
So it has a happy ending?

A:
It has a very happy ending.
[EROS and PSYCHE approach the raft and sit on it together.]

Q:

Almost none of these stories have completely happy endings.

A:

This is different.

Q:

Why is that?

[*PSYCHE and EROS kiss. And kiss again.*]

A:

It's just inevitable. The soul wanders in the dark, until it finds love. And so, wherever our love goes, there we find our soul.

Q:

It always happens?

A:

If we're lucky. And if we let ourselves be blind.

Q:

Instead of watching out?

A:

Instead of always watching out.⁴

Our second story is from a play called *Eurydice* by Sarah Ruhl. The play is a contemporary adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The genesis of the play was Sarah Ruhl's realization that we never hear Eurydice's voice in the story—the story is always told from Orpheus' (male) perspective. So Ruhl decided to unearth a female voice and perspective from this myth. Ruhl acknowledges that she also was attracted to Eurydice's story because she dies twice. And Ruhl notes that myth in its largeness can frame our own, smaller stories. She uses this story to frame her grief over her father's death at too young of an age.

The story as told by Sarah Ruhl begins with Eurydice's father in the Underworld. It's not clear how long he's been dead. Above the Underworld, in our world, it's Eurydice's and Orpheus' wedding day. Eurydice meets an unknown man at the water pump, the sounds of the gathering wedding celebration in the background. The man tells her, "A wedding is for daughters and fathers. The mothers all dress up, trying to look like young women. But a wedding is for a father and daughter. They stop being married to each other on that day." Then he reveals that he has a letter from her father, sent up from the Underworld. But, he tells her, the letter is back at his high-rise apartment. Would she like to come and get it? No doubt she was already missing her father on this big day, and the man's words about fathers and daughters left her particularly vulnerable. So she follows him to his building and up all of the steps to his apartment. Once there,

⁴ Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 68-77.

the man first tries to seduce Eurydice, and then corners her. She grabs the letter from him and runs for it, falling down all the stairs she had just climbed. The fall kills her; she keeps on falling, all the way to the Underworld. The joyful wedding bells have turned funereal.⁵

Her father sees Eurydice shortly after her arrival in the Underworld. He talks to her, but she can't understand him. She doesn't know him, or where she is, or that she's died. She thinks she's just arrived at a hotel and he's working at the hotel's front desk.

Meanwhile, the grief-stricken Orpheus writes his beloved a letter. And another, and another. He sends them to her by way of worms. Her father reads one of the letters to Eurydice, and suddenly it all clicks for her: she knows who she is, who Orpheus is, who her father is. She knows she's dead. But her memory doesn't come back completely. In a very sweet interchange, her father tells story after story from her childhood in an effort to help her more fully recover her memory. They get to know each other all over again in a new and rich way.

Orpheus keeps on writing letters, and in one fateful letter, announces to her that he's coming down to find her. When he arrives in the Underworld, Hades (in the guise of a child) tells him that he can have Eurydice forever. His beloved will follow a ways behind him as he walks toward the gates of the Underworld. Once they get to the gate, they are free to leave. But there's one condition: Orpheus must not look back at her. If he does, the deal is off: he will lose her forever. "That's easy," Orpheus says.

Eurydice knows the deal, too. She follows Orpheus with precision, taking one step for every step he takes. Then she makes a decision. She increases her pace. She takes two steps for every step Orpheus takes. "Orpheus?" she says when she catches up with him. He turns toward her, startled. He looks at her. She looks at him. The world falls away, and they start walking away from each other. They lose each other a second time.

Why did she go up to him? Curiosity? A lack of trust that they really were on the cusp of being reunited forever? Was she like Psyche when she unveils Eros, not trusting her feelings of love? We don't get an answer to this question.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Underworld, her father believes that Eurydice is about to leave the Underworld forever. He grieves the loss of his daughter a second time. "Do you understand the love a father has for his daughter? How does a person remember to forget? It's difficult." But there is a way to remember to forget: all he needs to do is dip into the Underworld's river and he will forget everything. To end the pain of his grief, this is precisely what he does.

Eurydice soon returns and discovers that her father can't hear her, see her, or remember her. After lamenting all that she has lost for a second time, she writes Orpheus a final letter. She apologizes to him for looking at him. She gives him permission to remarry, and she gives instructions to his next wife. Then she dips herself into the river.⁶

An interlude by Johnny Cash:

⁵ This one line is from Zimmerman, p. 41: "The joyful wedding bells become funereal."

⁶ Other than the above footnote, this story is a summary of Sarah Ruhl, "Eurydice" in *Divine Fire*, pp. 277-328. I use much of her wording in this summary.

The first time ever I saw your face, I thought the sun rose in your eyes.
And the moon and stars were the gifts you gave,
To the dark and the endless sky, my love.
And the first time ever I kissed your mouth,
I felt the earth move through my hands.
Like the trembling heart of a captive bird
That was there at my command.

And the first time ever I lay with you,
I felt your heart so close to mine.
And I know our joy would fill the earth,
And last till the end of time, my love.

The first time ever I saw your face.⁷

A final story: the story of Baucis and Philemon, as told in Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*. The gods Zeus and Hermes disguise themselves as two old beggars, stinking and poor, ragged and filthy. They visit a town and knock on a thousand doors. A thousand doors are slammed in their face. Finally, they knock on the door of a very humble hut on the outskirts of town. Baucis and Philemon answer and invite them in. They offer them warm hospitality and the finest meal they can muster. The disguised gods ask why. "You are children of God." As Philemon pours wine for their visitors, he and his wife notice that the wine bottle magically replenishes itself. They realize that it is gods in disguise they are serving, not two old beggars. Their little hut metamorphoses into a grand temple, and the gods offer Baucis and Philemon one wish. They ask that they might die at the same moment.

Many years later, at a ripe old age, their wish is granted. Baucis notices her husband is beginning to put forth leaves, and he sees that she, too, is producing leaves and bark. They are turning into trees. They stand there, hold each other, and call "Farewell," before the bark closes over their mouths.

Walking down the street at night, when you're all alone, you can still hear, stirring in the intermingled branches of the trees above, the ardent prayer of Baucis and Philemon. They whisper: "Let me die the moment my love dies. Let me not outlive my own capacity to love. Let me die still loving, and so, never die."⁸

Here's the question these stories and Johnny Cash's song pose for me: Is love eternal? Or is it destined to die, a hundred percent of the time, as we are destined to die? Which is it? Once again, the myths seem to answer an either/or question with "Yes." I love the

⁷ <http://www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/johnnycashlyrics-firsttimeever.html>. This song is on the CD, *American IV: The Man Comes Around*.

⁸ This section is a summary of Zimmerman, pp. 77-83. I use much of her wording in this summary.

Johnny Cash song because it captures this ambiguity. The song was written in the 1950s by Ewan MacColl for his beloved. Johnny Cash makes it his own song. The lyrics express the view of a young person in love, knowing in your heart that when you first kiss or lie with your true love, your joy will fill the earth and last till the end of time. But it's sung by an old man, his voice raw and full of impending loss—his beloved wife June would be dead in a year, and Johnny less than four months after that. You can hear the weariness and the sorrow in his voice. And you can hear his conviction that love is eternal. Love painfully ends, and goes on forever.

This dual reality is always in the background of weddings. Aside from the experience of a loved one's death, the wedding day is perhaps the most powerful encounter many of us have with death and its inevitability. When you make a vow that has a timetable bounded on the other end by death, you know that you are unlikely to experience the simultaneous death of Baucis and Philemon. One of you will die first—your beloved or you. And eventually, you will both be dead. Death will come. Separation will come—at least on a physical level (and the Greeks asserted that this is an important level)—even if you manage to keep the love alive as you long as you live (which of course is no easy task). So “Till death do us part” is a very sobering vow. If we really listen at weddings, we can hear the funeral bells underneath the joyous wedding bells.

Given the certain reality of death, staying true to your love for another person demands extraordinary courage. Psyche's hanging onto her love for Eros, even in the face of the potent and dogged opposition of Eros' mother, Aphrodite, illustrates such courage. Psyche is willing even to travel to the Underworld, as is Orpheus. Though journeying there petrifies Psyche and she feels utterly hopeless in doing so, she does it all the same. It's what she had to do to keep her love for Eros alive. This is the kind of leap of faith that every life partner must take over and over again, year after year, for better or for worse.

Also as Psyche discovers, and Eurydice discovers, love demands radical trust. One of the participants in the companion class observed that Psyche and Eurydice follow the Reagan doctrine: trust, but verify. As they both find out, verifying doesn't work so well when it comes to love. Love requires radical trust and a certain kind of blindness. This is of course risky: our trust may be misplaced, and we may be badly hurt as a result.

If a loving partnership between two people is founded on deep mutual trust and the ongoing courage of the partners, then is their love eternal, or is it doomed to certain death? We're back to this central question. In our own time, Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia sometimes force this question in illuminating ways. The novel and movie *The Notebook* explores this question. As it does, it echoes some of the narrative from the myths we've heard today. The movie begins with an elderly man reading a love story from a notebook to an elderly woman. His name is Duke; hers is Allie. We quickly realize that she has dementia. The story Duke reads is a story of a tempestuous, passionate, on-again, off-again, on-again love affair. Slowly we figure out that the love affair is the story of this couple—only the woman can no longer recognize that it's their story. Allie wrote the story long ago, and included with it an instruction for Duke: “Read this to me, and I'll come back to you.” At the key point in the story—when the couple finally decides to be with one another forever—Allie does come back to him. She realizes that this is their story. They have a very sweet reunion. Her recovered memory

is short-lived, however, and Duke painfully loses her again into the fog of dementia. Then, as he continues to read the story, her memory returns again. This time, she asks Duke if he thinks that their love could miraculously take them away at the same time. “I think our love can do anything we want it to,” Duke replies. During the night, arm in arm, they die in bed together.

The Notebook answers the question about whether love is destined to die or is eternal in the same way as the myths: Yes. So how can this be? The key to this confusing answer is to understand what “eternity” means. Mythology and a lot of different spiritual traditions tell us that eternity is not some future time, some other place. Eternity instead is something that we experience in the here and now of this world. Joseph Campbell calls eternity “a dimension of now.”⁹ When do we experience eternity? In moments of deep connectedness, when we understand in our deepest soul that we are a part of everything. These moments are characterized by feelings of insight, wonder, and, sometimes, bliss. They don’t *last* forever; they *connect* us with forever. This is what Allie and Duke experience when Eros pierces them with his golden arrow. Eros—passionate love—it turns out, is a powerful doorway into eternity. It’s not the only one, but when eros is life-giving, it is a very significant doorway. “Let me die the moment my love dies.” Baucis and Philemon whisper to one another. “Let me not outlive my own capacity to love. Let me die still loving, and so, never die.” This is how love, though finite, can be immortal.

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⁹ Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), p. 18.